Your Life's Work
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Sunday Evening Club
30 Good Minutes

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In the center of Florence there is an ancient building which sits opposite the Cathedral, the Duomo. The building is the Baptistry, octagonal in shape, where the earliest Christian worship took place in Florence and where baptisms have occurred since the early middle ages.

People come to see the Duomo with its famous dome and they come to see the great doors to the Baptistry. They are bronze, probably 10 - 12 feet high and the individual panels depict scenes from the Old Testament and the life of Jesus.

They are astounding. Every detail is in place: each panel tells an entire story with warmth and passion and humanness and sometimes a sense of humor.

The doors are the work of a Florentine artist and sculptor, Lorenzo Ghiberti, who lived from 1378 until 1455. What kept me returning to Ghiberti's doors was the fact that he worked on them all his adult life. He received the commission when he was 25 and worked on the doors until he was 74, 49 years. Finally he stopped working on the doors and not long after, he died.

He did a lot of other things too. But the doors were his focus, the common thread that ran through his whole life.

Actually it was a good friend who stood with me, quietly looking at the doors and said, "Wouldn't it be wonderful to be able to create something and at the end of the day be able to point to it and say, there – that is my life's work?"

I think sometimes that the greatest gift of all is knowing what your life's work is and the privilege of being able to do it.

I know that the decision about what to do with your life is the most important decision you and I ever make.

I know that many people, of all ages, are still trying to decide what to do.

I know that the decision about what to do with your life isn't made once, but that there is a sense in which we all make it over and over again.

I know also that people live lives of dull unhappiness, because the decision about what to do with their lives turned out not to be a good one and they don't know how to unmake it, or for a variety of reasons, cannot unmake it.

I know that the decision about what to do with your life is a religious decision whether or not you think of yourself as a religious person. Because the decision about your life's work is about your values, your ultimate values, and ultimate commitments, and ultimate beliefs about who God is and who you are, and what the meaning is of the whole enterprise.

And I do know that it is never, never too late for any of us to decide what it is and to do it.... Your Life's Work.

One time, a man was walking beside the Sea of Galilee, talking with his friends and the crowd of people who were following him. And when the crowd became too large he stepped into the fishing boat of one of his closest friends, Peter, and proceeded to speak to the crowd from the boat. Later a peculiar thing happens. The man instructs his friends, all of whom are in the boat now, to put down their net. "It's no use," Peter answers him. "We've fished all night and caught nothing." But they do it anyway and catch so many fish the boat begins to sink. And Peter says, "Woe is me. Depart from me, Lord." Translate that – "something funny is going on here – something more personal than this big pile of fish." "Don't be afraid," Jesus said, "from now on you will catch people." Peter's life's work is emerging, and he and his friends...left everything to follow him."

Deciding what your life's work is and deciding to do it is the most important decision you and I ever make.

Viktor Frankl, a Viennese psychiatrist who survived Auschwitz, wrote about it later and the relevance of his observations continues to intrigue me. Frankl observed that when men and women live without hope, when life has no meaningful goal except its end, life begins to dissolve ... strength dissipates, as does the all-important will to live. He wrote:

> "Any attempt to restore a person's inner strength in the camp had first to succeed in showing him some future goal." [*Man's Search for Meaning*, p. 76-77]

Frankl discovered that a source of the will to live and not simply sitting around in despair, putting in time, waiting to die, was having a goal, a purpose. The goal didn't need to be some lofty ambition, to write a symphony, or discover the cure for cancer, or establish freedom and justice for all. In that dreadful situation, the life-giving goal was to do what needed to be done now, here and now: to help this man, to share food with this woman, to comfort this child. The ones who could rise above what was happening to them by forces beyond their control, the ones who did what

they had to do, not only seemed to live, they seemed to live more fully, began to talk with one another again and to remember and to write poetry and gather to sing songs: the children drew pictures, the musicians formed string quartets.

There is something about knowing what you need to do – knowing what your work is – that adds a spiritual depth to life, regardless of the circumstances in which it is being lived.

Sometimes our culture, with its values, does not help ... either in the discovery or the doing of our life's work. Duke's School of Business published the results of a poll in which the vast majority of students responded to a question about what they wanted from the school by declaring: "Money, power and things."

That simply won't do for the long run. And to the degree that this culture of ours cannot come up with something better, something more life-giving, life enhancing, it is a culture sick at its very heart.

How about instead of "money, power and things," "peace, joy and justice?" How about "to learn how to live, to learn how to love, to learn the joy of responsible participation in a community?" "How about the enhancement of the life of our own dear ones, or one child?

It is at heart a religious issue. But, not everyone can or should attend seminary and become clergy persons. In fact, some would argue that we have enough ministers already. What we really need are lots of people who see God's hand and purpose in what they are already doing, or what they are clearly gifted to do.

Author Dan Wakefield offers his own experience. In mid-career, Wakefield seemed to be sinking into depression, anger, disillusionment. And then he met Dorothy Day – founder of the Catholic Worker Movement and a halfway house in the Bowery. Wakefield volunteered to help in the kitchen and wrote later about "a real mystique that called to young people, offering in the midst of the grim poverty of the Bowery something that all the glittering affluence around us lacked – a sense of purpose, a way of transcending self through service." Wakefield didn't become a social worker, but he did become an intentional Christian and returned to writing, his life's work, now with a sense that it was what God wanted him to do, had gifted him to, had given him to do.

Some need to drop everything and follow. But not all can. In fact, it is for those who cannot that this word is important. You may not be able to leave your job to follow your dream. You have responsibilities and people depend on you and it may be that what you are doing that enables you to fulfill your responsibility and care for those who depend on you is, now – in this moment – your life's work. You may not be able to leave a relationship for a variety of reasons – even though leaving

presents itself as a daily option and it may be that staying and doing what you have to do – now, in this moment, is your life's work.

And, of course, it may be that your life's work is to do just that, to leave everything to follow him.

It is the most important decision you and I can make.

It is a decision that you and I make every day.

It is a decision that can make us desperately unhappy or deeply and profoundly happy.

It is a theological decision, a spiritual decision.

It happened when Jesus Christ walked among us and called his friends, some of whom changed jobs and roles and most of whom did not, but all of whom he called to live more deeply, more radically, more lovingly, and some of them, women and men, left everything to follow him and some stayed right where they were and there found a way to leave everything and follow him.

May something very much like it happen to you.

Amen.